

ALMOST A HANGING A TRUE STORY FROM THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH

By Gretchen Woelfle

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YOUNG GEORGE ERSKINE worked at a shipyard in Thomaston, Maine, hewing giant logs into spars and ribs for schooners and dipper ships that sailed all around the world. One day a sailing ship brought his cousin Abial home from the California gold rush.

“I didn’t make a fortune,” Abial admitted, “but I climbed mountains so high there was hardly enough air to fill my lungs. I saw a desert so dry that nothing lived there but ornery cactus and ugly lizards.”

George had never seen mountains or desert or cactus.

“I saw Indians, mountain men, and prospectors so rough you got splinters on your eyelids just looking at them. It seems half the world is moving to California. Some folks find gold. All of them find adventure.”

George wanted adventure. “I’ll try my luck,” he said. So he packed up his tools and, just after his seventeenth birthday, he sailed for California.

In San Francisco George bought a mining pan and a red flannel shirt and caught a boat up the Sacramento River. At Sacramento he bought a mule and headed north to Middle Creek. Rushing streams tumbled down mountainsides covered with ponderosa pines. Patches of brown canvas marked the mining camps. Most miners lived in canvas tents. After working twelve hours a day, they had no time left to make life comfortable.

For weeks George trudged up one mountain and down another. Day after day he filled a pan with gravel and water from a stream. He swirled the pan, washing away the gravel. Heavy gold flakes—if there were any—sank to the bottom. But George

found barely enough gold to buy food to stay alive. It wasn't easy when one egg cost three dollars!

Thousands of men roamed the California hills hoping to get rich. Some didn't know a hammer from a handsaw. But George knew, so he unpacked his toolbox. He got jobs cutting posts for mine props and logs for dams. He built square wooden pipes and sluice boxes, too. Miners made dams to channel water through pipes and sluices set in the stream. The long sluice boxes had ribs or "riffle bars" nailed along the bottom. Miners shoveled mud into the boxes, and the flowing water washed away dirt and sand. Heavier gold dust sank and got caught in the riffle bars.

Soon George was making more money than most prospectors. All went well for him until one night when darkness black as river mud covered the camp.

"Erskine! George Erskine! Where are you? We'll find you, so you'd better show your face!"

"Quit hollerin'!" called groggy voices from nearby tents. "Erskine's over by the big pine tree."

George crawled out of his tent and met a rifle, inches from his nose. At the end of the rifle stood Mort, a skinny man with a grizzled gray beard.

"Here he is!" Red shouted, waving a lantern at George.

"Here I am," George echoed. "What's going on?" He slowly lifted his eyes from the rifle to the lantern. In the flickering light George saw Red's bushy black hair and pasty white face.

Mort nudged the rifle barrel toward George. "You the one who built us them pipes and sluices, right?"

"A-yuh," said George in his Maine way. His voice sounded shaky. He took a deep breath.

"Out West you don't cheat your customers," a voice growled from the shadows.

"That you, Fritz?" George called, trying to sound friendly.

Fritz ignored his greeting.

"As soon as you left, those sluice boxes stopped working," said Mort.

"So we plan to string you from the nearest tree," muttered Fritz, who was tying a noose in the end of a rope.

George froze. He'd heard of vigilante gangs killing men for less than a broken sluice box. Frontier justice is what they called it.

"I stand by my work," George said in a steady voice, but not feeling too steady inside. "I built those boxes out of prime timber."

"All I know is they don't work," Red shouted.

Maybe he got his name from his red-hot temper, George thought. Better not show him I'm scared.

"Did the boxes come loose?" George asked.

"No, they're just like you left 'em. But the water don't drain out, and we can't get our gold if it don't," said Fritz. "We already lost a day's work."

"I'll look at them as soon as it gets light," George offered. "And I'll fix them. No charge."

"You won't live that long," growled Mort.

"Tonight, then. I'll look at them now," George replied. "I'm not a crook."

When he talked tough, he felt braver.

"Well," allowed Red, "there are trees at our camp we can hang you from."

George trudged upstream with wet boots, a rifle at his back, and three men who wanted to hang him for an outlaw. Why, they were no better than outlaws themselves! He'd stand his ground. He didn't come all the way to California to get hanged.

When they finally got to the men's camp, George stood in freezing water up to his knees and inspected his work. It was getting light now.

A square wooden pipe carried stream water to the sluice box. The water should have run through the sluice and back into the stream. Sure enough, water was going into the pipe, but none was coming out the other end. George held a lantern close to it. He checked the joints, looking for faults and leaks. Everything was snug and tight.

"The pipe isn't leaking," said George.

"So what?" said Fritz. "It don't work."

"I'll pry off the top." George pulled and strained, and the board popped off. Water hit him in the face. He felt around the pipe, and something slapped him.

He jumped back. "What's that?" He groped with two hands and pulled out a huge, flapping salmon.

“There’s your problem!” George cried. “A salmon swam into the pipe and got wedged in tight.”

The men stared at the salmon, then at George, then at each other. Red chuckled, then Fritz. Soon the whole bunch was laughing, even George.

Suddenly the salmon shot out of George’s hands and landed on the bank. It wiggled on the sand, trying to reach the water. Mort dove for the fish and tripped Red, who fell on top of Fritz. Mort tried to stand but fell down again as George lunged beneath him for the salmon.

The four of them flipped and flopped on the ground, laughing and shouting and grabbing for the fish. When they finally picked themselves up, George held tight to the salmon.

“Let’s try the culprit,” Mort cried.

“Guilty on account of he plugged up the pipe,” Fritz called out.

“I sentence him to death by frying!” Red added.

“That’s better than a hanging,” George allowed. “Let’s eat!”

This story is based on a true incident in the life and George B. Erskine (1838-1929), who was born in Palermo, Maine. George made two trips out West during the gold and silver rush of the 1850s and '60s. Then he returned to Maine, where he bought a farm, married, and raised five sons.